

SUMMARY: EFFECTIVE ESL TEACHING AT JAPANESE LANGUAGE SCHOOLS

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Being an effective teacher has nothing to do with being a native speaker of English. Successful instruction requires skill, and skill involves learning effective teaching techniques. This paper focuses on making English language classes at Japanese language schools more interesting and informative. An effective teacher can make his class more interesting by carefully considering: pace, question order, seating arrangement, voice, humor, supportiveness, dress, movement, blackboard, and names. The class can be made more informative by carefully considering: text, topics, pairs, conversation or text, and focus.

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Many foreigners who come to Japan eventually teach English at language schools, high schools or colleges, or teach private lessons. Too often teachers enter the classroom with the cavalier attitude: "Since I am a native speaker of English, there is really nothing to do but to step in front of the class and speak." Such misconceptions are soon dispelled after teaching only a few classes. As the student numbers dwindle and the teacher meets with bored expressions, he soon realizes that successful language instruction, like any other skill, takes study, dedication, experience, and application. There are fundamental differences between teaching at language schools and teaching at high schools or colleges, so this paper will focus on the teaching of English at Japanese language schools. Teaching at colleges will be dealt with at another time.

Treated under the same heading as language schools are culture centers, although there are some differences between the two. Still, both types of schools can be taught in much the same manner. The first question a successful teacher must ask is why the students want to go to a school. Although the answer initially seems easy enough, "to learn English," there are other possible reasons. Often the student wants to have a hobby, or wants to meet people, or just wants to keep his mind active after marriage or retirement. These are just a few possibilities. Understanding the needs of the students enables the teacher to make the class interesting and informative.

These two key points, interest and information, will be starting points. They are parallel roads that lead us towards a single goal of effectively teaching a class.

Let's start with interest. For students to learn, they first must be interested in what they are learning. There are a number of things a teacher can do to make his class enjoyable.

PACE: The pacing of any class is very important. If the teacher goes too slow the class will become bored. If the pace is too fast the students can't follow what's being said and they fall behind. Pacing is particularly important in the case of Japanese students. When they are asked a question that they can't answer they tend to stare at the book and remain silent. The teacher must learn not to wait too long for an answer. As soon as it becomes apparent that the student does not know the answer the teacher should ask another student. To make sure the student who could not answer is not discouraged, the teacher can ask the same student an easier question later. Pacing becomes increasingly important as the class progresses because the students tend to become more tired the longer the class continues.

QUESTION ORDER: A common mistake teachers often make is to ask questions in strict order, calling on students alphabetically or calling on them one seat after the next. Once a student has answered they tend to relax and not pay as strict attention because they can predict when they will be called on again. A teacher should always call on students randomly. That way they never know when they might be called and they pay closer attention. The teacher should always make sure that students are not overlooked, particularly students sitting in the back.

SEATING ARRANGEMENT: Japanese students tend to sit at the back of the class. Students should be required sit at the front part of the class. This makes for greater group cohesiveness, plus the students can see and hear better towards the front. Students should also be encouraged to sit close to another student who can act as a partner. This facilitates group activities and adds to cohesiveness.

VOICE: The teacher must speak in a clear, loud voice so that all the students can catch what is being said. This pertains to students also, particularly shy students who speak in a low voice while looking down at the desk. If this is a common occurrence other students quickly lose interest in the class.

HUMOR: Injecting humor in a class makes a class more interesting and enjoyable. A one or two hour lesson can seem incredibly long unless the teacher provides some humor occasionally in either the exercises or conversation.

SUPPORTIVENESS: The students should not be afraid of making mistakes. The teacher's reactions to mistakes should be supportive and never critical. Always try to understand the student's viewpoint, even when you disagree, by saying such things as: "That's a very good point, but..." When correcting grammar mistakes, use common sense. If the teacher stops and corrects a student after every mistake the student will become discouraged. Focus on the repeated and

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serious mistakes. Flow of communication is every bit as important as grammatical correctness.

DRESS: At first this seems like a superfluous addition, but within the fabric of Japanese culture appearance is very important.

Foreigners tend to place more emphasis on content rather than form. In Japan, though, things are judged by their appearance as well as content. How you appear is important. Look professional.

MOVEMENT: When the teacher stands at one place in front of the class the whole period a static pall falls over everything. Don't be afraid to move around. Moving breaks the monotony and breaks down the distance between teacher and student. Don't hesitate to walk right into the center of the class on occasion.

BLACKBOARD: The blackboard is a very useful tool to clarify and organize points to be learned. Don't hesitate to ask students to draw maps or pictures on the blackboard. Especially interesting to Japanese students is when kanji characters are drawn on the board by the students. It helps to have students in front of the class at certain times rather than the teacher. It's a change of pace, and surprisingly, shy students often do not hesitate to write kanji characters on the board and explain their meanings.

NAMES: Use the students' names. It helps personalize the class and forms a bond between teacher and student. Don't just ask for volunteers all the time. You will find that a few of the same students answer all the questions. Constantly call on students from different parts of the class. If they can't answer, move right on to another student. If you don't know the students' names or have a very large class, have the students make out name cards on folded pieces of paper and have them stand them up on the desk where the teacher can read them.

The above boldface items are just a few of the techniques that will help make a class more enjoyable. Undoubtedly the reader will add items to the list of his own that have worked for him.

The second key point, after interest, is information. A language class is little value other than entertainment if the students learn nothing. An effective teacher knows how to help the students learn.

TEXT: The starting point for an informative class is a good textbook. The level is extremely important. If the text is too easy the students will get bored, and if it is too difficult the students will be discouraged and quit. It is probably better to err a little on the easy side of the spectrum. Even if the text is a little easy the students will gain confidence. A good text will include listening, grammar, pair work, vocabulary, dialogs and informative reading exercises.

TOPICS: A good class balances text work with conversation practice. A student can practice

many things at home, but conversation is essential and should always be included in every class. Two old reliables: What's new? (the students can talk about what they've done recently, especially on the weekend) and what's in the news? (students talk about current events). These should be dealt with during the first part of the class. Students will be coming late through the first part of the class, so the textbook part should be saved once the conversation part is finished or begins to flag. One cautionary note: use "serious or deep" conversations with extreme caution. If the class is extremely intelligent or serious, such topics as AIDS or women's rights or divorce, politics, etc., may work, but for the usual class they are downers and tend to darken the atmosphere of the class. Also it is rare for students to have adequate vocabulary and knowledge to speak of such topics. If such topics come up during the conversation, they may be dealt with, but on the whole avoidance is best. Do not talk of sex. Students are easily embarrassed and silence soon follows.

PAIRS: Students should sometime work in pairs. The stronger students can help the weaker students, and it gives everyone a chance to relax from focusing on the teacher. Don't worry if the students speak Japanese during pair work. It is the time for them to discuss what they don't understand and help each other.

CONVERSATION OR TEXT: There is often the temptation, especially if the class enjoys speaking, to dispense altogether with the textbook. Although such an idea at first sounds attractive, it is counterproductive. A textbook gives substance and confidence to the students, not to mention being a lifesaver if the conversation dies. A good text generates conversation and introduces interesting topics. Also, students tend to measure their learning by how far they have progressed in the book. It is a tangible marker for them.

FOCUS THE CLASS: Every class should focus on at least one tangible point or theme. A class may be interesting while it is going on, but they should be able to recall at least one solid thing they have learned, one tangible piece of substance, that they can point to and say I learned this in the class. If a student can't point to one solid thing they have learned in the class, it was not a successful class. Students should always be able to tell someone else at least one thing they learned immediately after the class is finished.

If the following points collected under the headings of interest and information are pursued and adhered to, a teacher can feel confident that his class has been successful and his teaching effective. One final note: every teacher has some bad classes, classes where the conversation doesn't work, or the students can't understand the grammar points, etc. To be a good teacher one must realize that mistakes are part of the learning process. Learn from your mistakes, and make the class better next time. Effective teachers are always learning and so are their students.